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WEB SITE DESIGN

A white paper from Entrelevel

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BASICS

Classification of web sites

It is important to decide right at the outset what form the site will take:

- Information resource for customers, suppliers, investors, etc
- Trading base (an electronic shop), taking orders and possibly consumer payments
- Members-only resource with private area requiring login to access, plus perhaps one of the above.

The site may well progress from one level to another during its lifetime.

The rest of this paper is concerned specifically with the “information resource” class of site.

Audiences

Just as you would plan any kind of paper publication for your business, you need to decide **who** your site is aimed at.

- A sports club may decide that its audiences are members, potential members and visitors from other clubs. (A yacht club will have visitors by land and by sea.)
- A drug company will need to post information for health professionals, for patients taking its drugs, for pharmaceutical researchers and for potential investors in the company about each of its products.
- A charity will wish to produce information about its activities for both potential beneficiaries and for potential donors from whom it is seeking funds.

“Treatment”

Depending on the audience, you will need to adopt a different style for each. Not only is the information they need different, but the explanations will need to adopt different levels of complexity and language.

So different areas of the site will need to have quite different styles.

Information pathways

Having decided on the audiences, you need to determine their needs and the information you will provide to meet those needs. A good way to start is by a “mind map” which can be drawn on a white-board or large sheet of paper.

The starting point at the centre of the map is the home page, from which the different audiences radiate. On each audience line, branches will follow all potential lines of enquiry.

In some cases, different audiences or pathways will need to arrive at the same piece of information (eg “how to contact us”). In this case, draw lines to that information from the various places that

call on it. But beware of the issues of treatment! A “how it works” page for a user and for a technical person will be quite different.

DESIGN POINTS

Home page

The home page is the kick-off point for all visitors. It should be possible to determine from the home page all the directions available to them.

Many home pages simply say “Welcome to XYZ plc – click here to enter”. This tells you as much about the company as the painted windows of a Soho sex shop. All the information pathway start points should be visible from the home page.

In addition, do not let the home (or any other) page get so large that it will not fit on a single browser screen. Many users are unaware that they can scroll down so will totally miss whatever is at the bottom of the page.

As an example of a site I designed some years ago, which I believe obeys these basic rules, look at <http://www.rhyc.demon.co.uk/>

The 3-click and 20 second rules

Users have a short attention span and in TV journalism there is a strict recognition of the “3 minute culture”, requiring short sound bites, concise messages, etc. So it is with web sites – users want the information to be close at hand and will vanish to another site if they cannot find it in 3 clicks of the mouse. The design method described above for the information routes should enable them to do this.

More serious is user intolerance of slowly loading pages, especially the home page. Information should appear in around 20 seconds of the mouse click or the users assumes the site is broken or dead and will vanish.

Once into the site, the users expect each progression through the site to be fairly instantaneous. (If an order form appears, once completed they will keep pressing “order” until something happens – maybe ending up with 35 identical mixed cases of wine! This requires the vendor to take special action to “de-duplicate” the order data – quite unnecessary if the site mechanics work correctly.)

“Frames”

Many sites use a framed structure. However, this takes extra time to load and also makes it impossible to “bookmark” specific information that the visitor may wish to refer to later. Most web design guides (eg Internet Magazine) warn against frames, so if your site designer suggests this approach make sure you understand why this is being proposed and that it will actually benefit your visitors.

Graphics

Of course a picture of your product makes the site more interesting! However, graphic images are sent as files to the browser and the more you include the longer it takes to load the page. So every graphic must add value.

When capturing an image (eg from a scanner), use an image editing program (eg Windows Paint) to crop it to exclude any areas not required. With Paint you can use “reduce height”, combined with “invert top-bottom”, and “reduce width” combined with “invert left-right” to do this.

Then use Microsoft Photo editor (part of MS Office) to open the file (in BMP format) and use the “image | resize” to reduce the size to exactly what your site needs – perhaps just a thumb-nail. Whilst the browser can reduce the size of the display from any size file, this action reduces the download size of the file at its point of origin and speeds your site. Then save the file in JPG format, further reducing the size of file. Having chosen JPG as the “save as” file type, make sure you select the “details” button and reduce the “quality level”. You will find that 41% gives a good displayed image with yet more file size reduction – obviously the image cannot then be blown up to 10”x8” size, but that is not required!

Finally, in your pages use the “alt text” function to define words that appear instead of the picture if graphics are turned off for some reason, perhaps by a blind user with a braille screen. For this same reason, avoid images (such as a map) which require the user to click on an area to navigate the site (in the case of the map, to find an office near you, for example).

Drop down lists

Many sites use drop-down lists to allow more options to be selected from than will fit on a browser display. Do take care to avoid having so many choices that the poor user cannot pull the list down to the bottom on a standard 800x600 screen – not everyone has a 19” screen operating at 1600x1200 resolution! Check what happens if the browser is in a window and not full screen.

Java and Javascript

These tools can add functionality but be aware that not everyone uses a browser with these capabilities (often because of longer download times for Java). At very least, make sure your site can detect the existence of these capabilities and offer a basic page if they are not in use.

Mobile devices

The introduction WAP in 2000 was not a complete success, but it is worth thinking about the possible need for mobile users to reach your site.

If this is a requirement, make sure that

- your site is hosted by a company that can serve WML pages (most hosting companies cannot yet do so)
- your site designer has experience in creating WML pages

- the information actually needed by a mobile user is readily accessible from the limited size window of a WAP phone
- graphics are eliminated from the WAP version of your site, unless very small, very simple and very important to your message.

Further advice on this can be given if you have this requirement.

Making life easy for Search Engines

Search engines (such as Yahoo, Excite, Google, etc) will put your site on the map – or not! They trawl the Internet looking for sites and then list them under various headings (eg “sports clubs, UK”) where users can find them.

The search engines use the information of the home page and sometimes in its invisible “metatags” to classify the site and to identify the appropriate index headings. So make sure all the relevant keywords are on the home page.

Some search engines also visit every page in your site to see what information they can add to your listing. If you have used Frames, this is not possible and many sites that do simply appear as “this site uses frames – please switch this browser feature on” as their listing! If you do not want particular pages to be indexed, this can be done by putting them in specific folders in your site and using the “no robots” feature which your hosting company can assist you with.

Handicapped users

The RNIB has guidelines for usability for people with a visual impairment – all sites should follow these rules, not just those specifically catering for handicapped persons.

MORE HELP

This short paper can only give a few hints on the design issues. The key message is to plan before you commence the site design and creation.

If you need assistance with any stage of this process, please contact Entrelevel Limited to see if we can help you.

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